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Scribing as Seen from the Inside: The Ethos of the Studio

Jayne Wallace, Jon Rogers, Joanna Foster, Sean Kingsley, Nantia Koulidou, Erika Shorter, Mike Shorter, Natasha Trotman

Introduction

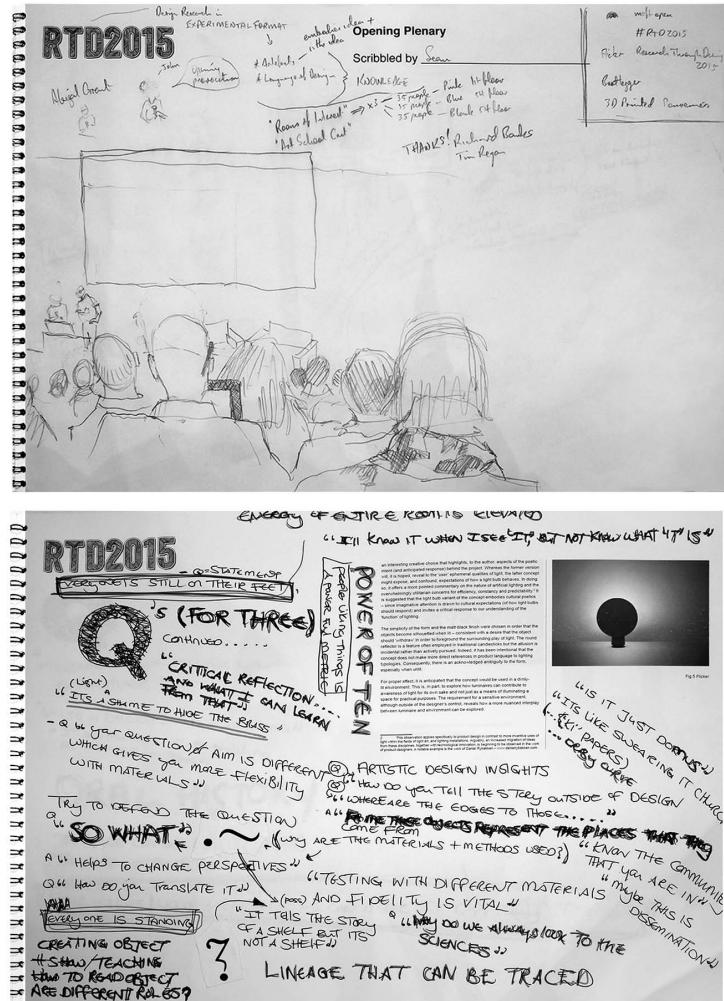
The Research Through Design (RTD) conference was first held in 2013 as a way to engage practice-based researchers of and in design to share their process, reflect on their work, and critique the work of their co-delegates. In a break from a traditional conference format, RTD placed objects at the core of discussion, with delegates seated around large tables on which the practitioners' work sat at the center as artifacts of research. A notable success of RTD 2013 was the richness of the intellectual critique that the "Rooms of Interest" and roundtable approach fostered. However, this success was a cultural memory that faded with time. The conversations, reflections, and atmosphere of this richness were left unrecorded. This loss was something we wanted to address through the documentation of RTD 2015.

This reflective piece focuses on the practices of Scribes, a feature that was newly introduced to RTD 2015 and was envisioned as a way to capture aspects of the highly discursive nature of this conference format. "Scribing" refers to drawing, writing notations, or mark-making on paper to capture some essence of the discussions, dynamics, and atmosphere of the various sessions of the conference as they happen. Scribing was selected because of its potential to capture more than notes of what was being said and because of its place in broader design studio practices as a means to capture ideas, conversations, and textures of group engagement. For RTD 2015, six scribes worked in pairs in the "Rooms of Interest" and collectively during "Provocations." None of the invited scribes were "professional scribes"; instead, each had an active interest in research through design and came from diverse backgrounds as practitioners. The scribes were briefed by the event's Documentation Chairs to capture conversations in any way that fit with their practice and with which they were comfortable. For example, Erika Shorter, a creative writer, used writing as her "scribe lens." The other scribes were Jo Foster (Fine Art and Music),

Figure 1

Examples of Scribe Sheets by Sean Kingsley and Natasha Trotman. Unedited.

Photo © Jayne Wallace.



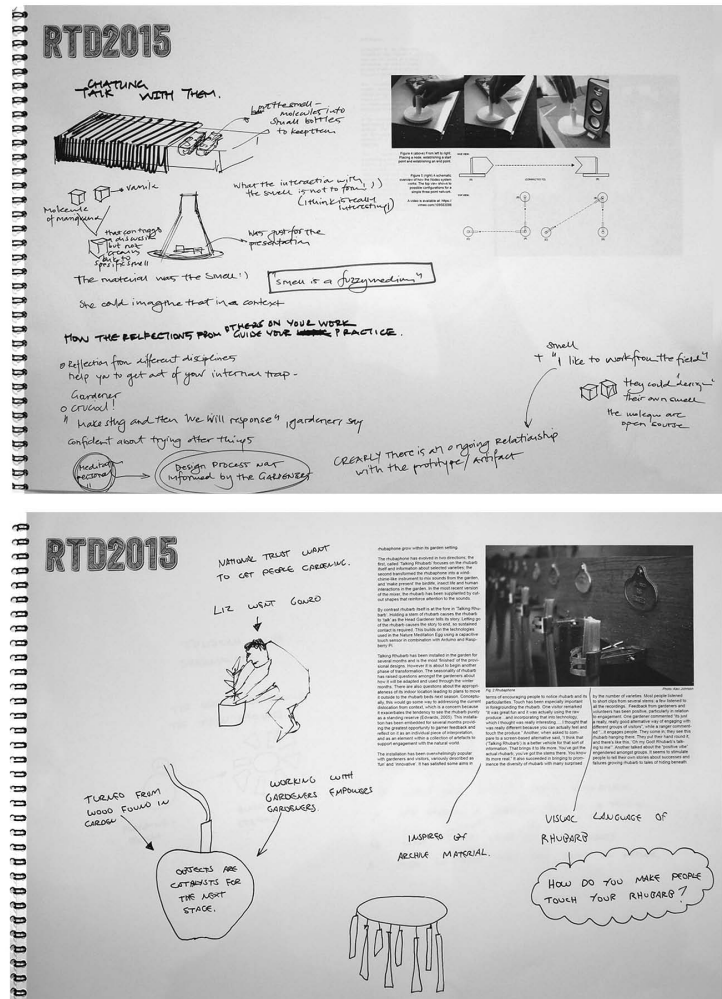
Konstantia (Nantia) Koulidou (Jewellery and Architecture), Mike Shorter (Craft Technology), Natasha Trotman (Interaction Design), and Sean Kingsley (Ceramics and Product Design). The Documentation Chairs and scribes make up this paper's authors.

For RTD 2015, scribes used as their "canvas" A3 landscape sheets of paper showing the presenters' accompanying papers, which were printed in black and white in the top right-hand corner (see Figures 1–3). We intended for this paper template to anchor scribe documentation to particular sessions and to be useful for the scribes should they want to draw on anything particular from the authors' work.

The scribes critically reflected on the nature of "scribing" using a number of channels: Live at the event, they presented their scribing to an audience of attendees; they received feedback from a post-event email survey; and they had collective discussions following the event with the Chairs that were audio-recorded for

Figure 2

Scribe sheets by Nantia Koulidou and Mike Shorter, unedited. Photo © Jayne Wallace.

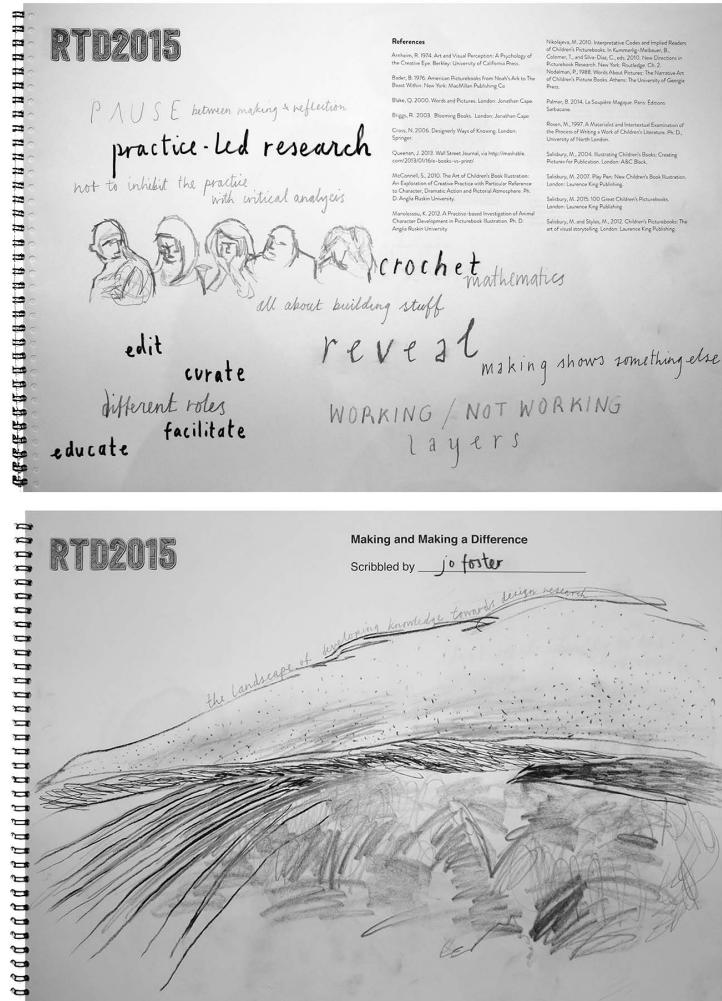


later transcription. These reflections then led to the generation of six “points of reference” that start to define the proposition of understanding a research dissemination event that stems from studio cultures of practice:

- Lenses of practice: seeing through the personal viewpoints of individual scribes.
- Collective value: the scribes’ sense of how they were adding value to their own practice and the wider event.
- Scribing with empathy: how the scribes felt in tune with the people (attendees and presenters) they were scribing about.
- Having a role and a tone of voice: the strong sense of awareness of being present and having a tone of voice. The scribes felt that they had a role to play and a job to do, which pressured them to be concerned about how they were being perceived.

Figure 3

Scribe sheets by Jo Foster, unedited.
Photo © Jayne Wallace.



- Deeply connected to the moment, mentally and physically: The scribes were acutely aware of the “liveness” of what they were doing. They were very much in the room at a particular moment in time, and being present this way was very physically demanding.
- Being a team: a defining reflection of the collective action of the scribes. Their sense of togetherness created a positive feedback loop that empowered them to be greater than the sum of their parts.

We elaborate on these six points using clusters of quotations from our recorded discussions (see Figures 4–9). This mode of presentation is intended to capture the polyphonic, live nature of the scribing endeavor. Rather than placing a meta-narrative over the top of each theme, we purposely present the discussion through the words of the scribes themselves.

Lenses of practice

Natasha – “I thought that RTD 2015 was a chance for the scribes and I to do something a little different - there is some freedom there for us to switch it up a bit...”

Sean – “My goal was trying to capture the things that weren’t in the paper – part of it is to make interesting drawings because you think well, what has been said is already in the paper and capturing the atmosphere and the event itself through drawing people and the spaces in-between.”

Nantia – “I tried to capture the presenter’s personality – I was interested in why they are doing the research they are doing – one person said my father was a farmer and I grew up on a farm, that’s why I’m doing agriculture and design, so there are always links - and you never write this in a paper – or frustrations about a process – it was the rigour of the research at the end of a discussion, but also this human aspect we can capture.”

Natasha – “I was interested in unused punctuations - I know that people exhibit all types of emotions, which are relevant to the punctuation, and I wanted to see how that could work - as the days went on I put more details into the person presenting, their body language, the space that they used, the pace of their speech, their tone, the responses of the people in the room and especially their behaviours – especially with the objects – the way they would pass an object around and it became more or less like a religious moment because everything became very quiet, subdued as everyone passed it knowingly to each other, like they all knew the protocol – you take it quietly, slowly, look at it, look at the next person, give them a nod, pass it on – that was interesting and I tried to capture that.”

Natasha – “When a session was more dynamic I used scribbles, symbols – when it was more calm and intense I made detailed notes. I had a little key in my head. I would do particular types of lines next to the drawing of the person under their name – i.e. this presenter had medium to fast speech, fairly constrained gestures...”

Nantia – “It’s kind of clear for me what other scribes have done. Jo for example she really had a clear understanding from moment 1 – getting key points, getting amazing portraits, but at the same time I liked it when a scribe changed a little bit depending on what they saw that was different. It’s more than opening your notebook and having your unique style there.”

Jo – “For me it wasn’t just what someone was saying, it might just be the way they held their hand, if they were tired they might be resting their head on their open hand you know – that brought another tone of experience to the talk – it might just be the way that everyone’s heads leant to one side when they were listening – or someone fidgeting – all of these little ripples through the room – all of these seen as incidental or even irrelevant moments... they’re the things that actually shape the conversations and make them valuable – that give energy to a situation - that allows that conversation, that debate to happen.”

Figure 4

Lenses of Practice. Quotes from scribe conversations Post-Conference.

Discussion and Implications for Both RTD and RTD Documentation

What the scribes have described is a collective experience of activity that enabled them to become both part of the capturing of an event and to be greater than the sum of their own individual practices. This sum of individual practices is in many ways the founding principal of a studio culture and a way of being that fosters a positive critique of work in a shared and safe environment.

To reflect holistically on the scribe endeavor is to see that the act of scribing introduces social messiness, collective marks, personal viewpoints, and points of conflict. Yet, in doing so, it also creates a strong social bond between those working together to

Collective Value

Sean – “I did read the delegates’ responses – one comment that’s interesting – they said they found the scribe sheets interesting because it helped them remember, albeit in a slightly different way. They didn’t feel it was any use for sessions that they weren’t in. Which I can see. *There’s a lightness about the scribing thing...*”

Jo – “I’ve picked up on a number of the audience asking how to convey value in this scribing process? I would ask *us* how do you convey the value and significance of the scribes and the scribing? Personally I think there is great value and significance in 2 things – 1: the process of actually undertaking it and being there – live scribing 2: the traces that are left afterwards of that transformative experience.”

Jo – “I wonder why some of the audience question this – maybe it’s just new to them? They did say something about ‘beyond material and materials’ I thought there might be something in that. Someone said they were a document, not documentation – I *wouldn’t* actually even call them a document – I think there needs to be another word, but I would agree it’s something else – I think that’s where the value lies. Because there will be conference notes, there will be papers, *this is something else.*”

Jo – “A few from the audience asked “is there a frantic need to document?” We know society is constantly archiving all of the time and I could see how it (scribing) could come across as that – in a way scribing is kind of cool because we do have this frantic thing in the world – we do have this archiving thing and if we can kind of use that framework but turn it on its head to say ok well this is actually a different form, a way of rather than locking things down into an archive cabinet we’re actually opening things up so its live, its transformative, its constantly reinterpreting...”

Natasha – “When you take a photograph and you want to elevate certain aspects you can put a filter on it – that was what I was doing – I was there to look at the room, how it was used, how the people were interacting.”

Jo – “As attendees of a conference you are very directional – you select which talks to go to – you’re focused in certain directions, but this, the scribes are almost like all eyes are everywhere – looking in different directions where someone might not look and capture these things – I think that is a value.”

Natasha – “If you look at official type documents of something like a seminar it doesn’t touch on all the points I’m interested in – it lacks that essence, element, presence of the person and the people that were there – I’m really interested in the people, how they respond to the work – how the person presents their research – responds to the room – about them as a person – their use of the space – their tone and what they bring to the actual space, because for me surely that’s the difference between them presenting and being there and them not and sending some copy over...”

Jo – “Audience comments that caught my eye – “capturing essences, nuances and tones” I loved that. This person said – “I liked the differences to my own way of thinking, drawing...” it was like a topography, all these different layers of interpretation and collectively they formed this open, porous sponge-like thing – that was on-going – it gave a descriptor or ‘way in’ to those in-between moments of the conference.”

Nantia – “It’s valuable for the audience in that when they see the combined scribe sheets and combine them with their own notebook it will give them richness – it’s adding layers, rather than adding more.”

Natasha – “Even if I wasn’t a scribe I would say scribe outputs were valuable because of the different textures, the different layers of information about the dynamics that were happening in the room – a push and pull kind of going on between the presenter and the audience. I think for an audience it’s sort of like time travelling, it will take them back to that session.”

Jo – “What I thought was the most interesting about the scribe sheets was it made me think a bit like with a song – if you hear a song you don’t catch all the lyrics the first time you hear it, you don’t necessarily catch all the melody, but the memory in your mind is formed from all things in combination – and that’s what emotively has an effect on you and gives you a feeling – gives an atmosphere and I felt like the same thing was there with the scribe pages.”

Scribing with empathy.

Nantia – “As scribes you are responsible. There’s pressure in that. As creative people we already have sensitivity creatively to our environments – as a scribe you’re even more sensitive to what is happening in the room and you don’t know which to capture first – so many good things – regarding the audience there’s a moral question – am I allowed to capture audience comments? You’re waiting til the last discussion section but even here people’s comments are overlapping and people are talking at the same time so it’s like a net of information.”

Sean – “There was an aspect where we were catching up all the time – trying to keep on top of what they are saying – capture it – and listen to what is being said next – always hard work that.”

Sean – “I felt pressure as a scribe: to draw well was the primary thing in a room full of people, a lot of whom could draw, probably; a pressure because it was going to be public; to be insightful if possible, but at the very least to ‘get it’. There’s a great strength in numbers – that there were 2 of us in each room – that reduced pressure a great deal.”

Jo – “One presenter wrote down that they were a bit uncomfortable that the impressions from people of their talk were taken down and shown to the public – there is that public, private tension – you’re on a kind of interesting edge there, which is very creative, but it blurs a few things.”

Nantia – “How would I feel if someone was scribing about me and how I was breathing and gesturing and what people felt about my work? – It would depend on their approach – I wouldn’t think it was like someone was particularly monitoring me because it’s something we all do anyway – that’s normal, but maybe in the environment of the RTD conference there wouldn’t be a problem for me because I think there is a community of trust – I would find it interesting to see how others see me. I can see the dark side as well so it’s not always the positive things – I can see there is a tension of personal space – with scribing you do have loose boundaries related to what you’re allowed to do and not – although there are still unwritten rules that we all know and are sensitive to.”

Figure 5 (left)

Lenses of Practice. Quotes from scribe conversations Post-Conference.

Figure 6 (this page)

Lenses of Practice. Quotes from scribe conversations Post-Conference.

capture some of the dynamics of a live conference. The scribing was meant to be not a disruptive element to the notion of the conference, but an alternate approach to empathetically placing the practices of design studio culture into a design research event to amplify the sense of a “design school crit.”

Design gathers an amorphous and diverse community, and the act of scribing was not embraced by the whole audience. For some, scribing was a positive and enriching experience. For others, it was a distraction. These varying perspectives are represented in the scribes’ reflections on the tensions both during the scribing and in the survey feedback. One learning to take from this experience is that perhaps we—the attendees and audience—need a “tuning” or an open-mindedness to endeavors such as scribing and to what a design conference can be, beyond expectations of a more scientific model of dissemination. Equally, the experience also indicates that experimental endeavors (such as scribing)—where delegates’ work and selves are being captured in some sense—need to be sensitively introduced through conversation with delegates to manage expectations and assumptions. Further, some delegates genuinely wanted to be included in the scribing and to actively provide input into the creation of documentation or annotation.

Having a role and a tone of voice

Jo – Responding to several audience comments stating that they would have liked to scribe as well. “Again it goes to roles as well – not everyone has to do every job. We don’t all have to present – we can present at different times, in different conferences, in this context it’s OK to have a designated team of scribes – but then open it out towards the end of the conference. The way that we did it was with the slides and with the music – another way in the future might be having some kind of a wall where people add to – ok – so there’s other ways that it can be opened up – but I don’t think the actual undertaking of something needs to be necessarily done by everyone. It *can* be but doesn’t *have* to be. I wouldn’t have a problem with saying you know these are the designated scribes – it’s not an exclusive thing or being cliquy – it’s not that.”

Sean – “There was an aspect where you felt you were hovering above it – we certainly weren’t part of the delegates – but in a funny way ‘above it’ is wrong – I felt more like a worker in the background – someone providing the tea and the coffee as it were. One of the desires in scribing was to be open, unfiltered, or whatever filter is on there to allow things to pour through, not to rationalise it or anything. So trying *not* to have a voice – inevitably you can’t avoid it, your filter is your filter, you pick up on things that are interesting to you or you dismiss things that are confusing to you – but the providing the tea and coffee analogy is maybe right – it’s that sort of janitorial function is what I felt – like being a camera, but more like a voice recorder. There was a bit of pressure not to embarrass anybody as well.”

Nantia – “How subjective and how objective was my scribing? – I’d say it was objective when I didn’t understand a point – but when I wanted to say something I always wrote (my opinion) in brackets.”

Jo – “I don’t have any problem with scribes having their own voice. In fact I think it is essential because it is the action of bringing our own experiences to something that creates something new when two (or more) things meet.”

Nantia – “Everyone could be a scribe and that’s great, it just happened to be 6 people this time – I don’t see that it’s a skill that you have or haven’t... Of course in theory you could be involved – but you haven’t been this time and that’s OK! You know! You can be next time.”

Jo – “Many of the audience comments did talk about the voice of the scribes, but on a very human level as individuals who have brought their own experiences and that’s a beautiful thing – because then there is that knitting together of what is happening live in the room, what people have brought with them and then what we ourselves as scribes have brought – all knitted together to create a kind of gesture or impression. I think that’s very different.”

Natasha – “Everyone brings their own voice to it even though you try to make it as neutral as possible so that the people in the room’s tone can be captured it still has your voice as the overall filter over the top of it.”

Natasha – “I think it was really good that we all had slightly different backgrounds and a slightly different take – all creative, but different specialisms – stops it being one note – you could see that it had been a collective effort.”

Figure 7

Having a Role and a Tone of Voice. Quotes from scribe conversations Post-Conference.

Beyond binary notions of “success” and “failure,” the delegate responses and certainly the scribe reflections indicate the existence of rich undercurrents of critique, nuanced engagement, discussion, reflection, and fresh understandings at design conferences—undercurrents that contexts such as round-table discussions enable. Arguably, these dynamics are seldom captured or commented on in the course of conventional conference formats. RTD as a conference is a test-bed for experimentation around forms of dissemination and documentation in the broadest sense of these terms and a format that was conceived as something emergent and responding to new opportunities. We will continue to

Deeply connected to the moment mentally and physically.

Jo – “I do think that you can be creative in a framework ... but it takes time to negotiate that framework – at the point where fatigue took over – literally my hand was dropping off so I started using my other hand. At that point I was stippling the content onto the paper – and a person in front of me said ‘shhhhhhhhh!’ It’s interesting as again it challenges what it means to group together to listen – we’re so used to like school where people are in rows and they listen to a single figure in front, or library settings where everything is really hush-hush and quiet – I think it challenged that as well – the scribing brought a different element into what is a traditional forum where you’ve got your speaker and you’ve got these people who remain silent and it kind of introduced again a more conversational element - this idea of being conversational, live debate is very interesting.”

Sean – “I was happy with the pace of it as well really, it was hard going, the rhythm is important I agree, I quite liked the fact that the intensity did stop too much reflection you just had to get on with it – it became less personal – being a conduit as a scribe rather than an interpreter.”

Mike – “It felt very intense – going from one session into another – it would be nice if there was a bit of time for reflection between the two – to add a bit to your notes and to make them make more sense for other people.”

Jo – “I hope that it (the projection of scribe sheets to the audience) benefitted from the live performance because that continued the live theme. I was a bit nerve wrecked – I think the live music was important, this underlining of the live thing - and saying it is live, it’s still live and it will morph again, change again - I think that point came across by having this music – but it’s very interesting – it was such a different audience to what I’m used to as well and also that steep arena thing – but after relaxing that’s when the improvisation came about naturally because again, all these processes, it takes a while to get to know it and settle in and then when you do that that’s when this little magic dust can happen – things click in.”

Natasha – “There’s just something special about what Jo brought to it – I can’t quite articulate it – I’ve never seen that where someone just creates a song in response to the work at a conference before, which is really exciting, because you don’t know what she’s going to be singing about next, so the unexpected added another element to it all as well.”

Sean - I remember wishing I’d been able to edit the drawings so I could get a bit more contrast in my drawings – my pencil line. I think generally I did like that session in terms of not feeling entirely embarrassed.

Jo – “What I think the scribing does, whether it’s through music or drawing - it removes that kind of passive element – it kind of creates attention to this invisible energy that’s in the room passing between everybody and the presenter and the audience and then that kind of starts conversation – or ripples of laughter, or recognition, or gasps of surprise – but they start actually articulating that energy in the room – I think that’s really cool.”

Natasha – “For me I just tried to set a pace for myself and a rhythm and I tried to keep with that rhythm – I was ok with the pace of it.”

Nantia – “Because it was an improvisation I was stressed to know what would happen – but in a way because you trusted Jo’s abilities to do whatever it was OK. I wouldn’t be in her shoes! She is incredible! I felt the session was not well designed by us though and we had limited energy and resources so I think it was the best we could have done, but not the best presentation of the richness of our work.”

Natasha – “I think one or two of the people (in the audience) felt they were being talked at, but I don’t know if they fully understood what the scribes were trying to do – which is recording what we could see, but we weren’t making a judgement or anything, we were neutral.”

Figure 8

Deeply Connected to the Moment, Mentally and Physically. Quotes from scribe conversations Post-Conference.

Being a Team

Nantia – “It (the group of scribes) worked great – we were so tired of scribing that in breaks and evenings we couldn’t talk about scribing any more and we were sharing the same lifestyle these days and that brought us really close really fast.”

Sean – “The camaraderie was great, I suppose the vibe of it – a group of people who didn’t know each other very well having a shared goal – I think that’s always really good, that’s how teams are formed isn’t it – although the goal was of course a bit indistinct, which was OK because we knew it was an exploratory type study.”

Natasha – “I remember being with Jo and we said ‘so how’s this gonna work?’ and we thought let’s just be organic’ so we sat together for a little bit and then we broke apart. We did look at each other across the room some of the times - something would happen and we’d mouth ‘did you see that?’ to each other or ‘swap?’ It was more logistics in the beginning to see if either one of us was in the right spot and if not we can swap or get people to shift around and then later it was all about ‘did you see that bit?’ and we had such a different take on things – we learnt from each other – it helps you to learn about different ways of seeing.”

Jo – “Natasha – I really liked working with her a lot and yes she did use words, but I find that very interesting because it’s not just the words, it’s not just the drawing it’s also the transference of the person to the page and Natasha has a lot, she’s very calm in herself, but wow there must be some tiger inside because her pages are so full of energy...there was one that was really busy, but that in itself, just gestures across the page gave me something and then as a viewer I had a choice – I could dip in further to pick out a word or two, or if I was really interested I could read the whole thing, but there was a wonderful choice and I think that’s what’s so interesting about the scribe process, there’s a choice as somebody who views the scribe sheets, you don’t have to religiously, again going back to a paper that’s written you don’t have to read from start to finish, instead you can take an impression of it like a song – you can dip in and you can just take out one little bit of meaning and I think that’s really valuable – I think that’s unusual and again it goes basically back to another way of learning-looking, learning-listening.”

Sean – “The thing about a professional scribe is their ability to draw quickly. The benefit of using non professional scribes is that there is the potential for scribes to be sitting above the group – a professional scribe has a real presence I think – because we melted into the room a bit more there was a quietness about us in each room. The benefit of us doing it the way we did was that we didn’t mess with the room that much – scribing as professional scribes do can almost become facilitating rather than scribing.”

Natasha – “I think the scribe group worked really well because we all had one objective – everyone was a team player – there was no one that wasn’t open or willing to share what they’d experienced or what they’d learned or their thoughts.”

Nantia – “At a certain point I realised we are a team – so if I didn’t follow something because I was tired in that moment I knew there was someone else capturing it.”

Nantia – “I’m getting the most from looking at Mike’s pages. The clear few lines – they let me think in-between the spaces and make my own sense of the session. I shared most of the sessions with Mike and it is his scribing that I got the most from. No matter how abstract I can follow because I was there.”

Natasha – “I’m quite an introverted person – but in the role of a scribe it gave me an ‘extrovert halo’ of sorts – people would come up and talk to me about how it was going, what they thought, what my thoughts were. I do think that doing it enabled me to interact with people at the conference more than I ordinarily would have if I was there as a civilian.”

Figure 9

Being a Team. Quotes from scribe conversations Post-Conference.

explore the ways in which design studio culture can be analogously woven into the “conference” as a format. What we take particularly from the RTD 2015 scribing endeavor is that the involvement of non-professional scribes from different fields of design and creative practice bring a series of personal voices, filters, and ways of seeing, listening, and capturing that can add to the layers of discourse and documentation created by attendees. The scribes created polyphonic views using mixed methods that actively opened interpretation (e.g., drawing, song, juxtaposition of words as visual impression), making the interpretation explicit and public, and continued dialogue beyond the conference format. The scribes were picking up on the moments in-between, the physicality of the social spaces, and the dynamism and excitement in each room. We see activities like this as having significant value for design forums as a means to add layers of interpretation onto what happens live and in real time in conference rooms.

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